WORLD

Marcos' men steal the show

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Philippines

Small, 60ish, and hanging on to the TV mike like a true amateur, the nervous poll supervisor was an unlikely heroine. Yet her embarrassing appearance on government-controlled television was the symbolic highlight of last week's nationwide local elections in the Philippines, an event advertised by President Ferdinand Marcos as the first flowering of democracy since he declared martial law in 1972.

In a major propaganda bungle, the diminutive school principal was pushed before a mobile unit broadcasting live from a post-election disturbance in Manila to tell the nation that, just after polls closed the night before, a government candidate's goons had overpowered her and substituted rigged ballots and tally sheets for the ones she was taking to a central canvassing station. Tired and frightened, but gutsily clinging to her empty vote box, she was the perfect picture of little Mrs. Everyman just run over by a very large and very ruthless machine.

That machine was the Marcos-led New Society Movement (NSM), and last

week it did indeed flatten the country, crushing along with its hapless opposition any pretence that a free election had been held. By week's end, the government-appointed election commission was claiming that the NSM had captured 69 of 73 provincial governorships, the bulk of mayorships and almost all the spots on provincial councils.

The wonder was that the opposition won anything at all. Most key Marcos opponents boycotted the vote, called with only six weeks' notice, and the president had arranged disqualification for many who wanted to run. Others were mysteriously kidnapped. Antigovernment groups could neither beg

nor buy mention in the media, which was full of promises by Marcos candidates to spend on popular projects funds few believed they had. Moreover, a requirement that each voter thumbprint his ballot did little to convince wary citizens that their choice

would remain secret, especially since hardeyed gunmen staked out voting centres, in one case shooting an opposition party observer.

By the time the exercise was over, 80 were reported dead and wounded, though the toll could be called “relatively light”compared with pre-martiallaw days when election killings often ran to several hundreds. Indeed, many Filipinos were wondering why Marcos’ party had settled for less than total victory. The president was already armed with absolute decree powers and, given the wealth and overwhelming organizational edge of the NSM, some observers felt it could have scored a respectable victory anyway. As it was, with the moderate opposition angered and dismayed, Marcos’ regime was once again facing domestic and international opprobrium. But to judge by the mood of self-congratulation in the government media, only one thing mattered: the president had had his election—and he had won. Richard Vokey